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ABSTRACT

In light of criticisms that many early childhood programs fail to engage children's minds, this study suggests that children need programs in which they can: (1) explore experience in visual ways; (2) experience aspects of different cultures; (3) extend their thinking; and (4) develop their imagination. That art and play can provide suitable vehicles for these endeavors is suggested by curriculum theorist and art educator Elliot W. Eisner, and exemplified by the Reggio Emilia preschool art program in Italy, which encourages and records the long-term creative activities of children for the children's own later review. Exposure to family memorabilia, for example, can help stimulate children's visual experiences and heighten their sense of perception. Australian children also need to become aware of the various cultures of Southeast Asia and the art that those cultures have produced, so that the children can experience aspects of the cultures of nearby peoples. Early childhood art programs need to encourage children to become involved and absorbed in mind-engaging work for extended periods of time, so that they can edit and perfect their work and transform original ideas into imaginative variations. (MDM)

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MAKING MEANING WITH EYES AND HANDS

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In 1991 I heard Professor Lillian Katz say that early childhood programs in the United States 'fail to engage children's minds'. (Dunedin New Zealand September). Katz went on to contrast this situation with the now famous Reggio programs based in Reggio Emilia in Italy. There has been a recent upsurge of interest in the children's art work stemming from international publicity about the Reggio Emilia preschool program in Italy. The high quality of children's art work produced in this program has stretched our horizons about what is possible in terms of the pedagogy of the method used and the respect shown to the children's own language and artistic output.

In the light of Katz criticism of American programs we in turn need to ask ourselves whether we provide programs that permit children to make meaning with their eyes and hands.

One of the curriculum issues which gives cause for concern to practitioners and educators alike is the theoretical and practical bases upon which we make short term and long term goals for art in the curriculum for young children. The quest for novelty in the variety of media to be offered often creates a menu of daily changes that become the content of the program as well as the timetable. It is considered that children need frequent changes to prevent them losing interest, and it is felt that parents expect visible products of children's art making and tangible signs of progress towards school learning. Where there is variation in children's output some professionals become uneasy about whether children are receiving equal opportunities. Some staff believe that if you give children precut shapes to fill in a stencilled outline that you can be seen to be preparing children for paperwork and for future schooling.

The prepared shapes may prevent children 'wasting' costly paper while they experiment and you can almost guarantee that every child has a product to take home. Despite recent excellent Australian publications in the area of arts curriculum for young children we need to address some of the deeper curriculum issues that may create barriers to children receiving the full range of educational opportunities that they need to develop all facets of their abilities. I also propose to discuss some of the range of curriculum experiences that can be a part of an expanded curriculum for young children which will enrich their play and their art.

Those of us who strive to be advocates for children's art and for play based programs, can gain support for our beliefs in the writings of Elliot W. Eisner curriculum theorist and art educator. Of the place of art and play in early childhood programs Eisner said

> 'Both art and play, like imagination and fantasy, are not regarded as a part of the serious business of schooling. To be serious requires clear goals, a well thought out plan for achieving them, and perhaps most of all, hard work. Neither play nor art is associated with work' (1990, p 45)

Whereas Eisner emphasises the curriculum frame – works needed, Gardner supplies us with the theory that children are capable of developing a range of forms of intelligence and argues that children need access and experience to develop all forms of intelligence possible.

In a recent issue of 'Family Matters' Don Edgar proposed 'Investment in early childhood' as one of 'the main policy issues for a decade of economic humanism' (1991 p 2). Furthermore Edgar strongly supported Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences when he was considering the needs of children today preparing to be citizens of the 21st Century.

To invest in high quality programs for young children implies some interpretation and framing of the curriculum goals for programs.

In the following paper I am going to argue that children need programs where they can develop the following broad goals:

- to explore experience in visual ways
- to experience aspects of our shared cultures
- in which curriculum goals extend children's thinking
- opportunities for the development of imagination

<u>Exploring experience in visual ways</u>

At the simplest level most families have some photographic records of major life events such as weddings, births, the smiling face with the missing

front tooth, or of a holiday outing to the beach. Through these basic family pictorial records children are helped to keep in touch with their own life history from before their earliest memory. This helps children to know who they are. The writer Broudy quoted by Eisner (1990) speaks of 'our imagic store .... made up of what we had once seen. Any activity that cultivates or refines our sense of sight not only escalates consciousness in its own right .... contributes to our imagic store' (1990, p 48).

If you pause to reflect a moment we can all think of distinguished writers and artists who recall their childhood images in their works of imagination. This gives us some cues to the potency and vividness of our early experiences. As early childhood practitioners we are responsible for making curriculum choices about materials and experiences for young children. Our decisions may influence the future contents of children's 'imagic store' which shape their life experience and their perceptions of the environment in which they are growing up. When one views the photographs of the enriched curriculum of the Reggio program we catch a glimpse of images that are particularly compelling.

Eisner's theory is a particularly valuable guide to the processes whereby playing infants strive to make sense of their experience. In so doing they construct a 'picture' or a concept that helps them to understand. In the next phase the child as constructor of experience also becomes a connoisseur. Eisner quotes the example of a music connoisseur who is able to 'hear music experience auditory patterns that no novice can hear' (op cit p 45). He concludes that '.... it is precisely the ability to experience that distinguishes the connoisseur from the rest of us' (op cit).

In the case of young children they can be connoisseurs of the sound that the refrigerator door makes, on the biscuit tin opening or distinguish the sounds of sirens heard. Eisner's thesis is that all of us have potentials to be what he calls connoisseurs. Our potential abilities can be heightened by experience. In Eisner's thinking connoisseurship can exist in all areas of life from sports, to films, cooking or painting. Children often experience connoisseurship for themselves by being knowledgeable about breakfast cereals, the best places to find snail trails, or cobwebs, which creeks have the best tadpoles, and where ripe fruit hangs within reach of the neighbours fence. We can learn from them if we listen.

Another of the ways that we can influence the way that children perceive their visual environment is by bringing children into close contact with natural and man made objects. The chance to feel and see a piece of driftwood, to smell different kinds of leaves and flowers, to observe the life cycle of a silk worm are as much the content of an art program as they are of science or environmental studies. These real life objects can also be presented in images through drawings, photographs, or sculptural shapes. Records of the Reggio program are full of such examples of stimulus to children's art making being influenced by experience of the tangible object, and later transformed by experience and imagination into further elaborated images.

Providing children with some opportunities to draw from life could be the key to heightened perception and an extended frame of reference.

Experiencing aspects of our shared cultures

In Australia we live in a country that is a part of South East Asia, with what we thought was a comparatively short cultural history. Very recently we have had cause to re-evaluate our cultural genesis since the findings that new Aboriginal rock art discoveries date back for thirty two and a half thousand years. This makes it clear that Aboriginal culture is the longest living culture in the world. As the rock art or cave paintings are often located in remote and isolated places which may be sacred sites, they are difficult for the general public to reach. So their presence has not been generally well known. Yet the contemporary vitality of Aboriginal art is evident in all of our National and State Galleries and in specialised Galleries such as Tandanya in South Australia. Many of our state art galleries and museums have education officers who are ready to assist teachers who wish to introduce very young children to original works of art. The value of children's early introduction to the works of adult artists has been demonstrated in the USA and Australia.

Research at the Queensland Art Gallery by Barbara Piscitelli based on her experience of a program for mothers and children involving art appreciation and art making has been of great value.

Discussion of aspects of culture is not complete without talking about the

domestic household cultures of our grandmothers. In her book called 'The Gentle Arts' author Jennifer Isaacs has helped us to see the aesthetic values in the domestic arts practised by Australian women in the contexts of their homes.

Women achieved a level of personal artistic expression in the service of their family roles as prudent and provident housewives. In a different series of publications Kaffee Fassett has taken the homely art of knitting from the domestic fireside to the status of a creative art form, in his books based on the collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The final example in this section related to culture connects the objects which children collect that lead to their personal ways of knowing. Children's instinct to collect is a part of the developmental sequence of play. This instinct is sometimes cultivated by commercial interests who promote their products hoping to ensure that children will pressurise their parents to acquire the coveted stickers or artifacts. However children have always collected small found objects such as stamps, bottle tops, shells, tickets and marbles. Szekely has a different view of these activities. He has persuaded us to see this play characteristic of children as providing them with personal experiences of art history. Szekely reminds us that in the process of making collections 'they become interested in the history of their own things, their finds – the history of dolls, teddy bears, marbles, or jack-in-the-boxes' (1991, p 43). In such ways children discover potential meanings that form the basis of art history learning.

Curriculum goals that extend children's thinking

One of the characteristics of the Reggio programs is that their extended approach to curriculum lends to the development of unusually long projects. 'The Wind Machine took several months to be completed, The Field and the Arrow project many weeks' (Rabbiti, 1991 p 138).

The question we are tempted to ask is 'What kept the children's interest?' Katz and Chard (1989) account for this extended interest thus "The principle behind project work is that activities lasting an extended period of time strengthen the disposition to become involved and absorbed in mind-engaging

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work. The disposition to lose oneself in an activity may be threatened by frequent interruption. The daily program for young children should be flexible rather than fragmented in allocating time to various activities' (pp 35–36).

The methods used in the Reggio program as reported by Rabbiti were that two hours each morning were directed to flexible activities and children could spend the whole morning in the art room or atelier. Furthermore the sequences of activities that flowed from the processes of creation and construction were photographed by the staff, and children's language was recorded and transcribed. So a project becomes a social compilation built on an extended framework with adults in partnership. The photographs ensure that children can retrace their mental steps in thinking and provide a visual sequence that records the experience. The partnership with adults was an essential element in the success of the experience.

The program uses resources from the local community environment both of man made objects such as sculptures and the natural world of flowers, plants and animals. Children are given time in which to master the skills needed to use the materials of art making for expressive purposes.

Eisner could have been describing the program when he said '.. when children are in charge, when skills are well developed, confidence grows and attention can be redirected from the technical use of that skill to its aesthetic use' (1990, p 50). The so called Reggio approach has the advantages of a consistent pedagogical theory, stable staffing and an atelier to be the focus for extended art making projects. The Malaguzzi principles explain the pedagogy thus as 'An interactive and socio constructive concept of child development which affirms that .. it is necessary for children to have proof that adults are convinced of these endowments .. as a consequence it is necessary for adults to know how to move coherently, knowing the art of support, intervention, abstention, especially abstention from loans of conscience and knowledge (Rabbitt 1991, p 110).

One of the techniques that is apparent in the Reggio approach is that it encourages children to explore the benefits of editing their work. We foster this practice in language approaches to the curriculum but not to art. Yet we know that outside the classroom many 7 year old children voluntarily

perfect their visual images that are important to them by endless repetitions of drawings of dinosaurs or Ninja turtles.

Eisner gives his support to the benefits of this process 'by which it allows a child to experiment, gives chances to discover what alterations of the work do for the work itself, allows the child to learn through the process of constructing the work' (Eisner 1990, p 53).

By our oversight in neglecting to provide children with these editorial opportunities we are probably losing potential cognitive and expressive benefits for children.

There is particular potential for such extension activities in after school and vacation programs. These are likely venues when children could have extended opportunities of time to pursue larger scale productions in co–operative social settings.

Development of Imagination

Eisner said that we should provide children with opportunities to cultivate 'multiple forms of literacy' (1990 p 55). One of the forms of representation is visible through children's drawings. A four year old who practised drawing the turtle that he saw daily in the acquariam found satisfaction both in finding a means to represent the texture of the turtle shell, and discovering that his drawing was recognised by other people. In a different situation a child may discover 'an occasion for inventing images and ideas that were not a part of the original idea' (Collingwood 1958, Eisner).

In this way the child may find an unanticipated outcome that transformed their original idea into an imaginative variation from the original. For such transformations to occur Eisner says 'The process of representation provides opportunities that make the development of such abilities and attitudes possible provided, they are encouraged in the classroom' (op cit).

On such occasions children are finding multiple images that enable them to extend the possibilities of a given situation from a literal one to the imaginative. This discovery involves imagining different scenarios. The philosopher Maxine Greene speaks of the benefits of imagination in terms of

providing children with ideas for new directions. Eisner provides the link between children's prior experience with materials leading to the discovery of imaginative possibilities (1991 p 51).

'As children are able to focus on the formal, expressive and inventive possibilities of a material rather than on matters of management, the kind of thinking that they are able to do enlarges. Sensibilities are cultivated if students can afford to pay attention to unfolding visual qualities. Imagination is strengthened as confidence in being able to control a material is increased. The ability to control a material liberates the child to think about matters at the heart of art making' (op cit).

The four broad general goals that we have been discussing need to emerge from a program context which provides children with sequence and continuity in learning. Successful art making experiences are preceded by the development of visual sensitivity, by the experience of a range of culturally related experiences, by adults who have curriculum goals to extend children's thinking, and by the provision of opportunities for the development of imagination.

At the conclusion of this topic it seems necessary to qualify the original title. It becomes clear that for children to be able to make meaning with their eyes and hands there has to be some engagement of their minds as well. This involves us in making decisions about taking an active role in curriculum planning for the arts as a part of a holistic approach to the curriculum, and thus providing children with the means to develop the full range of their intelligence. Preparation for the future goes beyond the scope of known knowledge areas and into the realm of being able to make sense of our experience.

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